Johnstone S. (2014)

Workplace partnership.

***In:* Wilkinson, A; Donaghey, J; Dundon, T; Freeman, R (eds.)**

***Handbook of Research on Employee Voice*.**

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.310-326.

Edward Elgar : Handbook of Employee Voice (Wilkinson, A. Donaghey, J, Dundon, T and Freeman, R. Editors - Edward Elgar)

Workplace partnership

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2014

Chapter 19, pp. 310-326.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores one of the most vociferous and controversial debates concerning representative forms of voice of the last two decades: the notion of 'workplace partnership'. In simple terms, the notion of workplace partnership is concerned with developing collaborative relationships between employment relations actors, especially between trade unions and employers, as part of a quest for mutual gains outcomes (Kochan and Osterman, 1994). This surge of academic and policy interest in partnership can be related to earlier debates regarding employee representation, and in particular the potential benefits and costs of trade unions as a form of governance in organisations (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). While trade unions can be viewed as negative forces which distort labour market outcomes, they can also be viewed as institutions which can positively influence both productivity and equality outcomes in organisations (Freeman and Medoff, 1984). From this perspective, trade unions are about much more than determining economic (wage) outcomes; they are also concerned with the organisational processes, such as the expression of worker voice which, and as such can potentially make a positive contribution to the functioning of the broader economic and social system, as well as to organisations (Johnstone and Wilkinson, 2013).

The chapter comprises four main sections. The first section explores *the meaning of partnership*, as the term has become a contested and conceptually ambiguous, despite widespread usage internationally in both academic and policy circles. It then presents some *theoretical perspectives* on partnership, and suggests that partnership can be interpreted in very different ways, and suggests that the frames of reference developed by Fox (1966) remain useful in this respect. It also helps illustrate how the notion of workplace partnership draws upon both continental European traditions of employee representation, as well as US-influenced debates regarding HRM generally and in particular the 'high performance' variant. The second section considers *the case for and against* partnership, and outlines some of the main controversies. The third section then maps some of the *international experiences* with partnership in the UK, Ireland, Australia and New Zealand. The fourth section reviews some of the evidence on the outcomes of partnership, focusing particularly on the experiences of the UK and Ireland, while the final section draws some conclusions and assesses the future of partnership as a form of employee voice.

2. WHAT IS WORKLACE PARTNERSHIP?

Defining workplace partnership

Over the last two decades, the notion of workplace 'partnership' has become a ubiquitous term in both policy and practice circles, and has also attracted a significant amount of academic research. Yet despite the intensity of debates, the term has remained conceptually ambiguous and contested. It is important at the outset, therefore, that we firstly evaluate some of the interpretations of 'partnership' given the loose and fluid nature of the term. The term participation is often used as an umbrella term for a heterogeneous array of practices associated with employee voice and employee representation, which acknowledges the various contradictions and strategic tensions which characterised the management of work and people (Boxall and Purcell, 2008). As a result of these tensions, the employment relationship is essentially 'contested' (Edwards, 2003), between dual demands from employers for both 'control and commitment' (Walton, 1985) or 'control and consent' (Hyman, 1987). Managing these tensions has long been a priority of employers, and the search for cooperation has a long history regarding the regulation of the employment relationship. Clearly, there are a wide range of options available to employers regarding how they choose to manage the sometimes contradictory tensions which characterise the employment relationship.

Thirty years ago, Purcell and Sisson (1983) devised a typology of five management styles based upon the extent to which unitarism and pluralism were emphasised. They suggest that unitarist management style could either be authoritarian in character, with workers excluded from decision making, or paternalistic, characterised by a more sophisticated but individualistic approach to HRM. Alternatively, from a pluralist perspective, there could be a greater emphasis upon collective employment relations, normally involving trade unions, and union-management relations could be either arms-length and adversarial, which they term the 'sophisticated modern constitutional' approach, or more flexible and problem-solving based, an approach they termed the 'sophisticated modern consultative approach. In many ways, it is latter approach which best represents contemporary debates about workplace 'partnership' as a form of employee voice.

Yet while the idea of cooperative union-management relations is far from new, the exact meaning of workplace partnership in modern workplaces has remained both ambiguous and contested, and a commonly accepted definition has remained somewhat elusive. Partnership has thus been described as "an idea with which almost anyone can agree without have any clear idea of what they are agreeing about" (Guest and Peccei, 2001, 207). The ambiguity and fluidity of the term probably explains in part why the partnership concept has been both popular and controversial.

Nevertheless, several key aspects can be discerned from the literature on partnership. Firstly, and in contrast to some of the more unitarist and individualistic HRM literatures, the notion of workplace partnership returns to a focus upon understanding the collective dimensions of the employment relationship. In voice terms, partnership returns the focus to the importance and value of representative forms of employee voice. Partnership is also concerned less with micro-level HR techniques, and more with improving the overall quality of the employment relationship and workplace relations. The emphasis is upon reducing conflict and increasing collaboration between stakeholders. Secondly, and again in contrast

to some unitarist HRM debates, an analysis of the partnership literature reveals a concern with 'reciprocity' , 'respect', 'legitimacy' and 'mutual gains'. Indeed, a core component of partnership is a dual concern with balancing the tensions of economic efficiency and competitiveness on the one hand, with ethical and fair employment conditions on the other (Martinez Lucio and Stuart, 2002).

While such a philosophy might be considered to be far from novel in many continental European nations such as Germany (Frege and Kelly, 2004), the notion gained traction in several Anglo-Saxon economies in the 1990s, inspired in part by approaches to employee participation and employment relations in Europe. However, the emphasis was less upon the societally-embedded, national-level *social partnerships* characteristic of more coordinated Germanic and Nordic economies. At a macro-level, social partnerships represent a particular and distinctive political and economic approach, with important implications employment relations issues such as skills and training, and employee participation and representation. Such approaches are also supported by legislation and strong institutional supports, as well as established traditions of European traditions of industrial democracy and social dialogue.

Workplace partnership, however, was concerned more with employment relations at a workplace level. In the UK, two influential policy definitions of this approach were offered in the 1990s by the Trades Union Congress (TUC, 1999) and the Involvement and Participation Association (IPA, 1997), both of which defined partnership in terms of a particular set of principles and commitments regarding the conduct of workplace relations.

TUC definition

- Commitment to the success of the enterprise
- Recognising legitimate interests
- Commitment to employment security
- Focus on the quality of working life
- Transparency
- Win-win

IPA definition

- Joint commitment to the success of the organisation
- Joint recognition of each other's legitimate interests
- Joint commitment to employment security
- Joint focus on the quality of working life
- Joint commitment to operating a transparent manner
- Joint commitment to add value to the arrangement

Academic definitions, however, tend to define workplace partnership in terms of a particular approach to organisational governance:

"An approach to organisational governance and change that is designed explicitly to permit union representatives to participate in organisational decision making, and which exist separately from collective bargaining agreements" (Geary and Trif, 2011, 45).

"A method of governing an organisation so that corporate strategies incorporate the interests of both management and employees – the notion of mutual gains...fostering new forms of collaboration and joint action between management and employees" (Teague and Hann, 2010, 101).

It has been suggested that a more useful definition of partnership would also identify *practices* and *processes* association with partnership (Johnstone et.al, 2009). In terms of *practices*, employee voice is central to all definitions, and this may involve a mix of direct participation, representative participation, and financial involvement. However, most policy definitions identify representative voice as a central pillar of partnership. Often independent trade unions are assumed to be the most appropriate vehicle for representative voice, though more inclusive definitions, such as those used by the UK government, IPA and CBI, have also allowed for the possibility for partnership in non-union contexts. In addition, workplace partnership as used in this sense is distinctive from the use of 'partnership' as a term to describe a particular model of ownership and organisational structure such as the John Lewis Partnership in the UK. This does not preclude John Lewis from also having a partnership employment relations model, characterised by collaboration between employers and employees (see Cathcart, 2013 for a discussion). Besides (representative) employee voice, complementary HR practices often include mechanisms to support communication, flexibility and job security.

It is noteworthy that many of the complementary HR practices are similar to those normally identified as part of a 'high performance work system' or 'high-commitment' approaches to HRM, where the aim is to increase productivity by raising levels of employee commitment, and indeed some commentators draw parallels between partnership and a HPWS approach (e.g. Appelbaum, 2000; Danford et.al, 2005; Glover and Butler, 2012). Inclusive definitions inevitably mean the boundaries between partnership and other HRM approaches are blurred. Other commentators, therefore, offer narrower definitions which limit partnership to situations where a formal collective agreement, committed to enhancing cooperation between employers and independent trade unions and staff associations, is signed by an employer and independent representative body (Bacon and Samuel, 2009, 232). A limitation of such a narrow definition, however, is that it excludes the possibility of 'informal partnerships' as part of what might be termed 'good industrial relations' or 'sophisticated HRM'. It also excludes the possibility of non-union forms of workplace partnership. A potential limitation of such a tight definition, however, is that in most Anglo-Saxon economies workplace partnership is a voluntary agreement rather than a legislative requirement and state regulation or inducement of partnership may be weak or non-existent (MacNeil et.al, 2012). It may therefore be preferable to allow for the possibility of informal partnerships and collaborative workplace relations which rely upon 'informal relationships', 'shared understandings' and 'cultural norms' (Dietz, 2004).

In terms of *processes*, decision making processes and the nature of actor relationships are crucial. Partnership rejects autocratic management styles; decision making processes are expected to be highly participative with extensive dialogue and consultation between management, employees and their representatives at an early stage. Actor relationships thus require high levels of trust, openness and transparency, as well as an overall commitment to joint problem solving in a way which is constructive and ultimately supportive of business success. Arms-length adversarialism is believed to be counter to the

partnership ethos and the aim is shifting collective employment relations towards a 'problem solving' approach (Bacon and Storey, 2000)

Finally, partnership is often associated with particular employment relations *outcomes*, such as 'adding value' or 'sharing success'. Other outcomes typically cited in the partnership literature include job security, employee satisfaction, work-life balance, and superior organisational performance. Nevertheless, these must be thought of as aspirations which can be explored and tested empirically, rather than components of the partnership process. Partnership may concern an attempt to achieve these outcomes, irrespective of whether or not they are achieved (Johnstone et.al, 2009). Despite, this caveat, a key part of the partnership ethos is the notion that partnership practices and processes will lead to mutually beneficial employment relations outcomes.

Theoretical perspectives on partnership

Clearly, the notion of workplace cooperation is not new, but draws upon a long history and various attempts at 'enlightened' employment relations which aim to reconcile the tensions of conflict and cooperation. Yet workplace partnership, as particular form of collaborative employment relations and as a form of employee voice, still lacks a commonly accepted definition. Given this inherent ambiguity, and in order to make some progress, we must return to some fundamental assumptions about the nature of organisational life and the characteristics of the employment relationship. It is useful to turn to the work of Alan Fox in this respect, as 'frames of reference' (Fox, 1966), can have important implications regarding the desirability and feasibility of workplace partnership.

Unitarism emphasises the common goals of an enterprise, with employees regarded as team members united by loyalty to their employer around a common goal of business success. For Unitarists, conflict is counterproductive and unnecessary; normally the result of poor management communication, bad outside influences or aberrant employee behaviour. Cooperation is viewed as the natural state of employment relations. Thus there is no inherent governance challenge to manage or other 'interest' to develop a 'partnership' with. The regulation of employment is best left either to the external 'invisible hand' of the market or some version of 'sophisticated human relations' which aims to integrate employer and employee interests and maximise employee commitment and involvement (Purcell and Sisson, 1983). Financial involvement and shared ownership is one possible option in this regard, as is direct employee participation in day-to-day job-related issues. Decision making power, however, is left in management hands meaning if this is a form of 'partnership', it is a one-side form of partnership (Guest and Peccei, 2001). Similar arguments can made regarding debate on High Performance Work Systems or more recently Employee Engagement, which tend to focus upon the relationships employees have with organisations as individuals (see for example Harley, this volume and Saks and Gruman, this volume). In short, while aspects of Unitarism might hold true for some employers who are ambivalent or even suspicious of employee collective representation and trade unions, most IR scholars reject this view of organisational life unrealistic (Johnstone and Ackers, 2013).

Pluralism, on the other hand, views organisations as 'miniature democratic states composed of sectional groups with divergent interests' (Fox, 1966: 2). Organisations are characterised by complex tensions which need to be managed in order to reconcile different opinions and keep conflict within accepted bounds. A key challenge is the regulation of

employment and the representation of competing interests. Different interests are believed to be both inevitable and legitimate; the focus is therefore upon developing channels through which conflict can be channelled, expressed and institutionalised. Classical IR pluralists saw trade unions and collective bargaining as the single-channel solution to these problems (see Ackers, 2012 for a discussion). A pluralist perspective on partnership draws upon continental European industrial democracy and a perceived need to address the imbalance of power between capital and labour. Legislative intervention is believed to be required to address such an imbalance, resulting in commitments to co-determination, consultation and communication, and robust employee representation is a central feature of this model of worker participation (Guest and Peccei, 2001). A limitation, perhaps, is that Pluralism has traditionally emphasised collective bargaining through trade unions as the best system of employment relations governance, albeit a conflict-oriented system often characterised by arms-length adversarialism and focus upon bargaining over distributive issues. Such a system remains at odds with the shift to more collaborative relations emphasised by workplace partnership.

Unitarist/Pluralist Hybrid. In reality, in the context of the Anglo-Saxon economies partnership involves a blend of unitarist and pluralist assumptions. Conceptually, many of the aspirations of partnership appear Unitarist in tone, for example commitments to the success of the organisation, and notions of harmony, cooperation, and win-win. Partnership can in part be viewed as an evolution of 1980s Employee Involvement and 'soft HRM'. Nevertheless, when partnership is operationalised as an employment relations process it is generally founded upon pluralist assumptions (Kinge, 2013), such as joint recognition of each parties interests, and commitments to managing the tension between the employers desire for workforce flexibility versus employees desire for job security. Inspiration is taken from countries with embedded systems of societal-level social partnership between labour and business interests, and where trade unions are influential. Again in practice, it is also likely that a workplace partnership will form one component of an overarching HR system, co-existing with various direct Employee Involvement and HRM techniques. Indeed, one of the most influential articulations of such a hybrid approach comes from Kochan and Osterman (1994) and their conceptualisation of the 'mutual gains enterprise' in the context of the US.

Central to the work of Kochan and Osterman is the need for integration of employment relations system within the overall workplace HR system. Drawing on developments in 1980s 'Strategic Choice School' partnership can be viewed a particular model of organisational governance which can constitute part of a mutually beneficial high performance work system. The idea is that such a system means overall performance and productivity can be increased, which in turns mean greater gains which can subsequently be distributed. However, Kochan and Osterman (1994) deliberately avoid the term 'High Performance Work System' stating that:

"[mutual gains] conveys a key message: achieving and sustaining competitive advantage from human resources requires the strong support of multiple stakeholders...employees must commit their energies to meeting the economic objectives of the enterprise. In return, owners must share the economic returns with employees and invest those returns in such as way as promotes the long-run economic security of the workforce (Kochan and Osterman, 1994, 46).

3. THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST WORKPLACE PARTNERSHIP

Given these different perspectives and conceptualisations of partnership, it is perhaps inevitable that the partnership debate of has resulted in a strongly contested case both 'for' and 'against' the potential for workplace partnership to deliver mutual gains for all organisational actors. It is to this debate that we now turn.

The case for partnership

The case for partnership has two main strands. Firstly, it is suggested that partnership is in the best interests of employers, employees, unions and governments. Much has focused upon partnership as the only option for the revitalising the beleaguered trade union movement in many liberal market economies (Ackers and Payne, 1998). Within a voluntarist environment where employers have significant latitude over their preferred approach to the conduct of employment relations generally, and employee voice specifically, it is argued that trade unions can use partnership as a way of achieving much-needed buy in from employers. Trade unions can thus be viewed, as both Tony Blair and Barack Obama have stated, as part of the solution to employment relations and business challenges (Spillius, 2009). Partnership can be viewed as compatible with – and even supportive of – business success, and as such the only form of unionism likely to attract much-needed state support. Secondly, and in addition to political support, employer support is also believed to be essential, and working in partnership to support business success is believed to be the only option for winning this support. Partnership is thus a potentially shrewd strategy in terms of revitalising the labour movement and repositioning trade unions as a legitimate and even desirable form of employee voice in contemporary workplaces. Thirdly, it has been suggested that cooperative labour-management approaches are desired by most workers. Employees have become disaffected with adversarial industrial relations and unions can revitalise themselves (in the eyes of members) by adopting a more cooperative and collaborative approach to employment relations (Kochan, 2000). In the UK, for example, it has been suggested that there is simply no appetite among most workers to return the adversarialism and divisiveness of the 1970s and 1980s (Brown, 2010). Finally, it is argued that partnership approaches to workplace representation are

The second argument in favour of partnership is that it will deliver mutual gains which can in turn be shared among the actors (see Avgar and Owens, this volume). The mutual gains thesis is based upon the proposition that collaboration affords the opportunity to expand the 'size of the pie' available in a way which would not be achieved through a more adversarial model focus upon just 'dividing the pie' (Cooke, 1990; Freeman and Medoff, 1984); in other words a shift from zero-sum to positive-sum relations. In some of the earlier US writings on the potential benefits of labour-management cooperation, it has been suggested that the benefits included enhanced union capacity to represent member interests and in turn greater employee commitment to and support of unions. It is Employees also benefit from higher levels of job satisfaction, greater voice, improved work life balance, less stress and greater autonomy, Finally, employers stand to benefit from improved firm performance, employee commitment, less conflict, productivity, staff retention; quality, and higher quality employment relations (Cooke, 1990; Kochan and Osterman, 1994).

The case against partnership

The case against partnership is primarily underpinned by a view that the achievement of mutual gains is illusory at best and damaging at worst, with potentially detrimental consequences for trade unions, their members, and the regulation of work and employment in general (Gall, 2008; Kelly, 2004; Thompson, 2003; Upchurch et.al, 2008). Mutual gains are believed to be illusory for several reasons. Firstly, at the micro (firm) level, it is suggested that many firms compete on the basis of a 'low road' strategy based upon cost-minimisation and low pay, despite the rhetoric of shifts towards a more sophisticated and potentially enlightened 'high performance HRM'. Secondly, at a macro (political economy) level, structures of corporate governance and employer-dominance mean a short-term focus on financial performance is inevitably prioritised despite rhetoric of stakeholding. The notion of, for example, balancing flexibility with security is therefore naive at best. Neo-liberal capitalism and financialisation, it is argued, means that even good willed employers will be unable to keep promised to share either the gains or pains experienced, and as such mutual gains are unattainable (Thompson, 2003). Management will always hold the upper hand and as a result any notion of balance is inevitably false, unscrupulous employers might seek to exploit the advantages position partnership affords. Even more critically is the suggestion that partnership could actually act as a facade for the further exploitation of ordinary labour by employers. In short, partnership cannot deliver for trade unions, and, as a result will mean they are unable to effectively represent their members. Partnership will further undermine the legitimacy of trade unions in the eyes of their members. Within lightly regulated employment regimes, the resultant imbalance of power, means strategies such as organising, or militancy are thus more appropriate strategy of revitalising trade unions. (Kelly, 2004). Genuine partnership would require a degree of labour-parity, which liberal market economies such as the Anglo-Saxon nations do not and cannot offer.

An ideological divide

In trying to understand these contradictory perspectives, it is useful to return briefly to notions of frames of reference (Fox, 1966). Most commentators broadly in support of the case for partnership subscribe to a Pluralist view of organisations. Ackers (2002; 2012) has taken this a step further in his conceptualisation of a particular brand of pluralism which he terms 'neo-pluralism'. He argues that while classical IR pluralism came to be associated with an over-reliance on trade unions and collective bargaining, a narrow emphasis on relations within the organisation, and a rather passive tolerance of damaging levels of conflict or 'arms-length adversarialism', Neo-pluralism retains the core sense of a collective tension in the employment relationship, but stresses the potential to bridge this through pro-active partnership solutions. Workers and management can construct high levels of co-operation, sometimes termed, 'productivity coalitions'. Shared values around specific projects can give a normative momentum to collaboration. Unions are usually central to this, but so are other forms of employee involvement and stakeholder relationship that go beyond 'wages and conditions' to wider issues of work-life quality and balance. A neo-pluralist perspective sees a potential for conflict between employer and employees over both the processes of employment regulation and the distribution of economic outcomes (Ackers, 2012). The challenge is to develop institutions of workplace governance and regulation which pre-empt and resolve conflict, while actively promoting cooperation. In many ways this resonates with the shift from constitutional pluralism to consultative pluralism (Purcell and Sisson, 1983).

Most critical commentators of partnership, on the other hand, subscribe to a more Radical perspective of the employment relationship and argue almost the exact opposite. Influenced by Marxism, IR radicals stress the inevitability of workplace conflict, linked to societal class strife arising from inequalities of power inherent in the entire economic, social, political, and legal structure. Capitalism creates fundamental inequalities and leaves little potential for constructive bargaining processes. Corporate governance within neo-liberal systems which prioritise shareholder returns combined with management opportunism make voluntarism a high risk strategy. Streeck (1998) suggests that within a "rational voluntarist" model it is easy for parties to withdraw and defect from approaches which might be in the best long-term interests of the partners, as opposed to responding to short-term expediencies (see also Thompson, 2003). Attempts at partnership could actually mask and reinforce inequalities behind a veneer of cooperation, while seeking to re-balance the employment relationship through regulation is likely to be futile. Kelly (1996) suggests that the growing hostility of employers to any form of union and the meagre achievements of partnership underline this clash of interests, and therefore, in the absence of strong macro level supports, militant union opposition to management is considered to be a better approach.

4. INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF PARTNERSHIP

United Kingdom

In the UK, the recent interest in workplace partnership can be traced to the early 1990s, and builds upon a long history of employee participation and interest in labour management cooperation. The turning point towards workplace partnership is typically attributed to the election of New Labour and the Blair government in 1997. Politically, the Blair government followed almost 20 years of a Conservative government which had, following the industrial relations crises of 1970's Britain, sought to limit the power of trade unions and deemphasised the collective dimension of employment relations. Trade unions have long been significant benefactors to Labour party and made significant financial contributions to the 1997 election campaign. However, 'New' Labour attempted to strike a difficult balance between being perceived to be 'business friendly' by trade union interests on the one hand and too 'union friendly' by business interests on the other. However, the Trade Union Congress and Confederation of British Industry, had also been, to some extent, sidelined by the Conservative government. While government interest in European-style national level social partnership was limited, there was some evidence of increased engagement between government and other stakeholders. TUC leader John Monks 'New Unionism' was broadly supportive of the need for unions to work together with organisations in the public and private sector to improve their competitiveness, a stance also taken by his successor Brendan Barber (Brown, 2010). The context was also one of union decline, which was arguably as much about the changing economic environment and the intensification of global competition than had to do with unsympathetic government policies of Thatcher (Brown, 2010). Economically, the election came following a decade of growth and New Labour set out with the 'Fairness at Work' agenda which aimed at improve both economic performance as well as the 'modernisation' of employment relations (DTI, 1998). The rhetoric was of fostering a model of trade unionism which provided services to members but which also helped firms to become more competitive (Howell, 2005). Practical and financial support to promote partnership was made available through Government-funded Partnership at Work Programme.

At a workplace level, partnerships often arose out of a crisis situation. Several partnership agreements were signed by a range of high profile employers - such as Tesco and Barclays Bank - and their recognised trade unions. Reflecting higher union density in the public sector, a large proportion often agreements were also signed in the public sector. However, formal workplace partnership has not become the dominant form of employment relations in Britain. A useful analysis of the spread of partnership has been conducted by Bacon and Samuel (2009). Their findings reveal 248 formal partnership agreements signed in the period 1990-2007; with the highest proportions signed in health and social work (34%); public administration (19%) and manufacturing (15%). In 2007, partnership agreements in the UK covered 1/3 of employees in the public sector but only 4% of workers in the private sector. Overall, this suggests that around 10% of all UK employees are employed in a workplace covered by a partnership agreement. While this might sound small, this was rise from only 1% ten years earlier. Importantly, most appear to be robust with over 80% 'surviving'; few employers have simply reneged upon a partnership agreement. Where partnership agreements have ended, common causes are mergers and acquisitions, as well as changes of business ownership. However, unlike some more pessimistic commentators, the authors reject the notion that partnership is "fading from the British industrial relations agenda" (Bacon and Samuel, 2009; p.261). Survival of partnership in particular contexts might be interpreted both in optimistic terms that it is because the actors continue to perceive overall benefits, or in more pragmatic terms whereby perhaps unions and employers feel that consider partnership to be better than alternatives.

Ireland

Ireland, in contrast to the UK, developed a centralised bargaining system as part of a national-level social partnership between 1987 and 2009. This was concerned with the alignment of wage determination processes with state macro-economic priorities, the launch of various social and economic initiatives, and involved unions, employers, government and community/voluntary organisations (Rittau and Dundon, 2010). However, like the UK, collective bargaining has traditionally been conducted within a broadly voluntarist framework. However, in the 1990s, there was increasing recognition of a disconnect between national level social partnership and the conduct of employment relations at the workplace level (Teague and Hann, 2010). There was subsequent interest in the concept of partnership at the micro (workplace) level, especially after 1997 and promotion of workplace partnership become more explicit in the document 'Partnership 2000'. This provided a framework for partnership and encouraged a broad shift towards cooperative employment relations in private/public as well as unionised and non-unionised contexts. A National Centre for Partnership, later renamed the National Centre for Partnership and Performance (NCPP), was also established in 2000 to support partnership (Roche and Teague, 2013), as was the Workplace Innovation Fund (Dobbins, 2010). The Irish Congress of Trade Unions and the Irish Business and Employers Federation also developed partnership principles in a similar way to their UK equivalents. However, the approach to partnership promotion has been soft with a reluctance to engage in regulation which, it is believed, might have compromised Ireland as an attractive place for foreign direct investment (Dobbins, 2010). Nevertheless, several high profile organisations – such as Aer Rianta and Waterford Crystal – embraced the partnership approach at the workplace level (Teague and Hann, 2010), although the adoption of partnership has not been widespread. Rittau and Dundon (2010) suggested that

the diffusion of partnership has been low with around 25% organisations reporting some form of workplace partnership agreement (Rittau and Dundon, 2010).

Australia and New Zealand

In Australia and New Zealand, interest in partnership can be traced to government initiatives to improve workplace employment relations and performance in the 1990s and 2000s respectively. Similar to the UK and Ireland experiences, the aim was to use 'soft' regulation to encourage management and unions to shift towards a 'high road' approach to the conduct of employment relations (MacNeil et.al, 2013). However, both Australia and New Zealand, have traditionally differed from other Anglo-Saxon liberal market economies such as the UK and USA. Until the 1980s both countries have been described as having "moderately coordinated economies", given the level of regulation and intervention of business and employment policy. However, since the 1980s the trend in both nations has been towards greater economic deregulation, decentralisation, and individualisation of the employment relationship, bringing the two nations increasingly into line with other liberal market Anglo-Saxon economies (MacNeil et.al, 2013, p3815). Similarly, both nations have had instances of social democratic governments utilising 'soft' rather than 'hard' regulation to promote a more 'partnership' approach to employment relations, reflecting in part a trajectory towards increasing economic liberalisation, as well as possible actor preferences for voluntary participation in labour-management partnership initiatives. Examples of specific initiatives include the Partnership Resource Centre in New Zealand and the Workplace Productivity and Partnership Pilot in Queensland, Australia.

In Australia, labour management cooperation was promoted as part of 'Best Practice' through the Australian Best Practice Demonstration Program established by the Labour government in the early 1990s, at a time when, like many other countries the nation was entering economic recession. This was bolstered by various other government programmes to support training, export, innovation and workplace restructuring and cooperation. From this perspective, partnership could be viewed as a component of other 'best practice' and organisational change initiatives which were influential at the time. However, when the Howard government took office in 1996, the approach to employment relations changed, and the administration took a less sympathetic stance to trade unions. The government terminated the best practice programme and interest in 'Best Practice' quickly evaporated. The notion of partnership has since reappeared under the Gillard government (MacNeil et.al, 2011).

In New Zealand, when the Labour Party came to power after 15 years of Conservative government, it was also interested in devising means of managing which balanced economic performance, on the one hand, and workplace reform on the other. In part the impetus came from concerns about low productivity in New Zealand compared to other small nations such as Finland, Denmark and Singapore. Partnership was supported by the PRC which was created in 2005 and offered support in moving towards a partnership approach. However, the impact was mainly in the public sector given the relatively low levels of union recognition in the New Zealand private sector (MacNeil et.al, 2011). However, it has been argued that outside the New Zealand Public Service Association formal partnership relations between management and unions at workplace level remain "virtually unknown" (Haynes et.al, 2006, 225).

5. OUTCOMES OF PARTNERSHIP

International of workplace partnership have attracted a high level of interest from academic researchers, providing a strong body of evidence regarding the outcomes of partnership in achieving their espoused goals. A rich body of empirical evidence now exists in relation to the experience of partnership in the UK and Ireland. Three main perspectives dominate the literature: the 'pessimistic perspective', the 'constrained mutuality' perspective and the 'contingency perspective'. We now explore each of these perspectives.

The pessimistic perspective suggests that workers and trade unions do not stand to gain much, if anything, from workplace partnership. Evidence of this perspective is probably most apparent in the partnership critiques in the British literature. John Kelly (1996; 2004) is probably the most vocal proponent of this perspective. In a study of matched partnership and non-partnership firms, Kelly (2004) found that while employers appeared to benefit from partnership, there were negligible gains for workers or trade unions when evaluated against criteria such as wages, hours worked, holidays, or job losses. Employee gains were only found to be achieved where unions were strong, and where the firm was performing well. His findings in terms of factors such as wage levels, influence in the company, and employment security were negative. Gall (2008) also represents this critical perspective, and suggests that in some cases partnership has actually weakened unions and worker influence over issues such as the terms and conditions of employment, with limited endorsement of partnership from union members. Critical studies thus reject the mutual gains thesis, and suggest a range of negative outcomes for labour are actually more likely including difficulties demonstrating union effectiveness, greater distance between unions and their members, work intensification, job insecurity, and labour outcomes no better than non-partnership firms (Kelly, 2004; Upchurch et.al, 2008).

On other hand, several British studies have revealed some benefits including stronger union organisation at the workplace level, greater employee support for unions, improved consultation, and enhanced union access to senior decision makers (Wills 2004; Samuel, 2007). This is not to say, however, that this more optimistic perspective portrays some kind of mutual gains nirvana; mutuality is often 'constrained' (Guest and Peccei, 2001). The 'constrained mutuality' perspective suggests that employees may well stand to benefit from partnership, but typically the 'balance of advantage' will be tipped in favour of the employer, focused upon, for example, employee responsibilities and productivity rather than employee welfare (Guest and Peccei, 2001). Nevertheless, to be sustainable, partnership cannot be completed lop-sided, for "positive organisational outcomes of interest to employers depend for their achievement upon the prior achievement of outcomes likely to be relevant to employees and their representatives (Guest and Peccei, 2001; 1321). In other words, when partnership is perceived to be serving primarily or even exclusively the interests of employers, the potential for these gains will be short-lived. Similarly, positive outcomes of workplace partnership have also been identified in the Irish context (Roche and Geary, 2002; 2006; Geary and Trif, 2010; Rittau and Dundon, 2010; Roche, 2009; Dobbins, 2010). For employers the gains identified have included improved productivity, support for change, greater flexibility, higher levels of trust, better communications, fewer disputes, better employment relations climate, employee commitment, reduced absenteeism and labour turnover and higher levels of innovation. For employees positive outcomes identified include

greater job satisfaction and sense of fairness, better communications, information provision, pay and working hours and influence over the job. Finally, for trade unions perceived benefits of workplace partnership in Ireland include greater influence and involvement, higher membership as well as the ability to better represent members.

In some ways these two perspectives can be combined by the notion that partnership outcomes are contingent upon a range of conditions which determine the favourability of the context to partnership working. Firstly, at a macro-level, the national legislative environment is believed to be significant. In the context of the UK, Samuel and Bacon (2010) suggest that perhaps it is expecting too much for employers and unions to recast employment relations towards an 'enlightened' approach without the coercion found in other northern continental European countries. They highlight the limitations of a non-statutory approach to diffusing partnership employment relations, with arms-length and low trust approaches to employment relations still common in many British workplaces (Samuel and Bacon, 2010). Similarly, in Ireland, it has been argued that workplace cooperation goes against the grain of voluntarist regimes which prioritise shareholder value and short-term results, and despite a macro level social partnership, the use of law in promoting workplace partnership has been avoided with national social partnership largely disconnected from workplace employment relations strategies (Dobbins, 2010).

However, where partnerships have been forged, they have often been driven by workplace level factors, such as business crisis, organisational change, or addressing poor employment relations. It could be argued that organisations which have voluntarily and proactively entered into partnerships might provide fertile ground for the development of cooperative employment relations precisely because the decision has been made voluntarily rather than an arranged marriage imposed by legislation. It could also be argued if we simply accept that 'employers cannot keep their promises' (Thompson, 2003), we risk becoming locked into a position of economic determinism. Evans et.al, (2012) suggest that besides (macro) political economy factors, we should also consider features of the industry (meso) or micro (micro) context that might support mutual gains. Increasingly the research evidence lends support to a more nuanced and contingent perspective, suggesting several factors which are believed to be supportive of partnership, including for example, a buoyant economic climate; a quality-driven business strategy, management support; union support, strong actor relationships, trust, high union density and integration with supportive HR practices (see for example, Belanger and Edwards, 2007; Dobbins, 2010; Geary and Trif, 2011). The fact that many flagship British partnership agreements still appear to be robust (Bacon and Samuel, 2009) further calls into question some of the more deterministic arguments (Thompson, 2003).

6. CONCLUSION

To conclude, a strong *ideological dimension* to partnership remains when considering the a priori conceptual case for and against workplace partnership (McBride and Stirling, 2002). Partnership appears to be more acceptable to IR Pluralists, while Radicals remain sceptical due to beliefs that political economy and corporate governance undermine any serious attempt at 'partnership' (Kelly, 2004; Thompson, 2003). Pluralists, on the other hand, argue that mutual gains can be achieved within a context of 'permissive voluntarism' (Dobbins,

2010), but that both the effectiveness of the process and the balance of gains depend upon the favourability contextual factors such as the rationale for partnership, product and labour markets, technology, and competitive strategy. It could be argued that many of these factors determine the extent to which governments and employers are convinced that a 'business case' for partnership is believed to exist, perhaps as a voice regime supportive of an organisation pursuing a High Performance Work System approach to labour management and HRM, where management believe labour management cooperation is essential for productivity and competitiveness (Butler et.al, 2011).

These conceptual and theoretical debates also influence how we interpret the empirical evidence on partnership, and in particular the extent to which such analyses focus upon interpreting the evidence as 'partial success' or 'partial failure'. What constitutes success is highly problematic (Geary and Trif, 2011), in part because radicals focus upon 'hard' substantive outcomes, while pluralists also value 'soft' outcomes such as the quality of relationships and fairness of organisational processes and procedures (Evans et.al, 2012; see also the distinction by Cooke, 1990 on extrinsic versus intrinsic costs and benefits). To add to this complexity, different organisational actors may place different weights upon the perceived balance of these outcomes (Geary and Trif, 2011). Of course, partnership must do more than simply improving the quality of relationships and must also generate tangible hard outcomes (Kochan et.al, 2008) but the former may even be a precondition for the achievement of the latter (Evans et.al , 2012).

We need to transcend simplistic 'who wins/ who loses' debates, and continue to develop a richer understanding of the context, processes, meaning and outcomes of partnership, as well as the contextual conditions associated with both positive and negative evaluations of workplace partnership (Johnstone et.al, 2009). Some thirty years after Purcell and Sisson (1983) outlined a 'Sophisticated Modern (Consultative)' variant in their typology of management styles, it could be argued that we have limited evidence of such a model becoming a dominant model of employment relations in most Anglo-Saxon nations. Partnership appears to remain a relatively rare model of employment relations, and it is easy to dismiss such approaches on the grounds that they have failed to 'modernise' employment relations (Wilkinson et.al, 2013). However the pressures to identify and develop forms of governance and voice which can manage the strategic tensions between economic and social imperatives which characterise the management of work and employment. The quest for workplace cooperation, mutual gains and collaboration is unlikely to go away (Boxall, 1996; 2013), whatever the process is called (Brown, 2010).

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